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Subject: From our Overseas Correspondent

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Subject: PORTUGAL WRC

Hi Everyone,

Well, we made it back from Portugal OK, but our rally experience was almost a complete wash out. The rally was held in atrocious conditions on the end of three months of continuous rain. No doubt you had read or seen on TV the bridge disaster a week or so earlier with the resultant loss of life and it was plain for us to see how hard the area had been hit by the ravages of nature.

Of the 22 stages we saw just 2 (two)!!! We were ready and waiting for another 3 but they got cancelled so we watched 1 stage on day one and 1 on day 2 and none (of 3) on the final day. Three circumstances conspired to beat us. Firstly, the weather was shocking with a mixture of rain, cloud and or fog forcing the cancellation of stages made impassable with mud. Secondly, the huge crowds made getting in and out of stages a lengthy, time absorbing process. The police would block roads 4, 5 and 6 kilometres short of the stages making for an unpleasant trudge in the mud often up hills. Of course it is good sport to try and bluff your way through and indeed we succeeded a number of times aided by their lack of "spoken" English and our even more average "listened to" Portuguese. The old freckle was fluttering a few times as we drove off towards the stage having agreed in sign language that we would turn around and park ! Thirdly was the total uselessness of the maps and it was little consolation that even the locally registered cars were jetting around in circles like headless chooks. They were even asking us at times. The problem is that good maps like we are all used to do not exist for Portugal and the 3 different types we had (including the official rally maps) never cross referenced to each other with roads and whole villages on one but not the other.

What we did see was good the famous jump in the Fafe stage, but that was less spectacular than usual, courtesy of the mud and the 2nd stage of day 2 in 5th and 6th gear in thick fog made worse by drifting smoke from spectators fires. Their speed in the fog was simply astonishing as they leapt over a jump landing just 1 metre from the crowd lining the narrow ditch edged track. Francois Delecour had the Mother of tank slappers as he landed awkwardly after the jump and rattled off into the smoke/fog between the crowds. These Portugueezers get their rocks off by getting as close to the cars in the dumbest of places and they fizz at the bung in proportion to the danger they expose themselves to. The videos show it but to stand amongst it (though three paces back, of course) is chilling.

Day 3 only had 3 stages and we hoped to catch 1 and 3 but to no avail as 1 was cancelled after we were well blocked in with our car leaving our only option to head for service. It was good to see the emotion in the Mitsubishi team as Tommi Makinen arrived having claimed victory, just from Carlos Sainz, in his 100th World Championship rally.

I had borrowed a radio scanner from work so we could listen to the teams but even that was a disappointment as the plane that relays everything was affected by the weather too. The only goss we got was listening in to the anguished call from John Lloyd (a regular competitor in Rally NZ usually in an Allport car) to his crew that the car had stopped on the way to service and it was most likely a lack of jungle juice.

So we came away with our tails between our legs but there were some good points. We got to see lots of Portugal that no one would normally go near and some of it we got to see two and three times as we drove

around in ever decreasing circles. We learnt that grapevines are like arseholes everyone in Portugal has them !! There were villages that had archways between the buildings made of the vines. Being the end of winter they were all bare and not particularly attractive but I'm sure when they are in leaf and bearing fruit the landscape would be so picturesque.

It is common to see shepherds tending their flock of only half a dozen or so sheep, cows or goats. They would generally be older people and either herding them along the road or just standing, watching their animals.... very 3rd worldy.

And, of course, coming a gutser like this made us appreciate just how good the other rounds we have been to are. Having now been to Finland, Corsica, San Remo, RAC, Monte Carlo and Portugal, I would rate Monte Carlo and Finland 1000 Lakes as hard to separate as best.... Finland for thrill and excitement of yumps on gravel and ease of spectating and Monte Carlo for its history, ice and snow mountain setting, difficulty for competitors, and because it is THE European rally you have to see. The Tour de Corse on the island of Corsica rates as the best Tarmac round though its perceived danger (real for Colin McRae) may see it removed from the calendar.

Am currently planning to get to the Acropolis Rally but will have to do some spadework first.

CHEERS

MARK